

J Hous and the Built Environ (2010) 25:265–267
DOI 10.1007/s10901-010-9182-9

BOOK REVIEW

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Received: 18 September 2009 / Accepted: 28 January 2010 / Published online: 31 March 2010
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Gesa Helms, *Towards safe city centres? Remaking the spaces of an old-industrial city*, Ashgate (Re-materialising Cultural Geography), Aldershot, 2008, pp. 221 + xiv, ISBN 978-0-7546-4804-8

The book *Towards safe city centres?* offers theoretical and empirical insights into the actual ways urban governance and policy agendas that seek to enhance local economic growth and market a city as an attractive place go hand in hand with a focus on policing, crime control and community safety. It contains seven chapters, comprising a theoretical framework (chapter 2–3), an empirical study about urban regeneration in the former industrial city of Glasgow (chapter 4–6) and a final chapter with concluding remarks.

The book starts with six vignettes of on-site visits in this city's polarized centre that illustrate the differences and the interwoven nature of the 'Glasgow of the new days' and of the past. For those who have never visited Glasgow the vignettes offer a wonderful introduction to this city and its policy to provide safe spaces for users. Glasgow's history is familiar: long famed for shipbuilding and manufacturing industries, the city experienced major economic problems in the 1970s but a significant resurgence since the early 1980s. Helms suggests this reversal of fortunes is heavily bound up with a process of deliberate 'imagineering': Glasgow District Council and other governmental bodies set up various wide-scale image campaigns to propagate the Glasgow of the new days and dispel images of poverty, dereliction, violence and crime. The internationally oriented 'Glasgow's Miles Better' international campaign (1983) that represented Glasgow as *the* friendly city and the bid to become European City of Culture in 1990 are direct outcomes of this imagineering. Nonetheless, as Helms points out, many of the social problems and the Glasgow of the old days persist and have been expelled into invisibility over the past decades.

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Of course, revitalization policies have not been limited to discursive strategies of re-imagining Glasgow. Social regulation has been another major ingredient, although this field was quickly pared down to crime control or rather attempts to reduce crime against businesses located in the city centre. Helms shows that many of the social regulation policies are underpinned by the logic of zero tolerance policing and the broken windows thesis, which holds that various forms of physical decay result in the breakdown of community controls and that the resultant disorder will inevitably invoke crime. She carefully describes the evolution of community safety programmes in Glasgow, focusing on both the institutional arrangements and the working practices of police officers, street-workers and many others 'on the ground'. Her analysis reveals how key actors in the New Glasgow soon began to label groups such as the homeless, prostitutes, drug addicts and Big Issue vendors as dangerous and undesirable and in need of displacement from the city centre. Police officers also tend to follow the old adage of keeping the (potential) criminal out but at times also resist the discourse that ties together economic growth, consumption practices and the importance of perceived safety.

Another intriguing development Helms maps out is the policing of public space by actors who formally do not belong to the police as an institution. Chapter 6 is entirely devoted to Glasgow's City Centre Representatives, uniformed agents who help tourists and other consumers, who pass on information to the police and council services and who help improve the physical environment. The project assists in the production of the Glasgow of the new days in two ways. Not only do the wardens play their part in the regulation of public space by being present and by watching, they are also drawn from the large pool of unemployed (male) adults and trained for integration into new Glasgow's active labour force. Yet, as Helms cogently shows, the project is full of tensions and the recruited unemployed do not always act as they are supposed to.

Key strengths of the book lie in the incisive analysis of how urban governance works out 'on the ground' and of the complex entanglements of structural economic developments, discourses about regeneration and safety and the actual practices and daily routines of human actors with particular knowledges, lived experiences and personal histories. These strengths follow from the particular theoretical framework that underpins *Towards Safe City Centres?*; Helms positions herself in the tradition of Marxist critical materialism, which seeks to overcome key criticisms of structural Marxism, such as its neglect of individual agency and its reductionism. Critical materialism thus focuses on the dialectics between historically and geographically specific agency on the one hand and structure as a fragmentary, patchy social totality on the other. Helms is not unique in this respect—many other geographers have worked with concepts developed by Henry Lefebvre, E. P. Thompson, David Harvey and Cindy Katz to name but a few. However, Helms extends this tradition by drawing on recent thinking about agency in German Marxism that has so far found little application in the Anglo-American literature. For instance, the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*—a spontaneous self-will and re-appropriation of social relations in workers' everyday practices that is vaguely reminiscent of De Certeau's (1984) tactics—sensitizes her to look for little ruptures and acts of resistance in the implementation of urban policy and governance (such as police officers effectively operating a toleration zone of prostitution in the city in spite of dominant discourses).

Adopting a critical materialist lens thus allows Helms to foreground the ambiguities and complexities of urban governance at the intersection of economic revitalization and safe public space. It is important to explore those complexities, she contends, not just to understand why the implementation of official (policy) discourses about urban space is only partially successful. Those ambiguities also offer opportunities for the formulation of

alternative, more socially inclusive policies and attempts to regulate and regenerate urban space.

While fully supporting Helm's claims regarding the importance of exploring the ambiguities of urban governance, we do think that this can also be done by drawing on academic traditions other than her geographically and historically sensitive critical materialism. For instance, some versions of the governmentality approach, which is based on Michel Foucault's later writings, could have been used to produce findings roughly comparable to those in *Towards Safe City Centres*? In fact, it seems to us that Helms sometimes overstates how her approach differs from both the governmentality approach and the relational approaches in geography that are rooted in post-structuralism and subsequent developments in social theory. Regarding the latter approaches, her remark that their "ontology of movement, change and fluidity ... remains an abstract one as it does not attempt to elaborate the historical, social and geographical specificities of movements, networks and changes" (p. 191) is in our view an over-simplification. It is quite easy to find work within relational geography that is not premised on the abstract ontologies proposed by Deleuze and others; research practices within this field are more diversified and imbued with *Eigen-Sinn* than the quote above suggests.

That said, Helm's book is a major achievement in at least three ways. It provides an unusually rich account of the interdependence of economic restructuring, crime control and issues of safety in Glasgow that may well inspire researchers interested in similar issues elsewhere in the UK and Europe. It also has much in store for students of governance processes more generally, especially because it offers a framework for analysing the complexity of converting the intentions expressed in policy documents and covenants in actual working practices at particular times and places. But even students and researchers with limited affinity for urban restructuring and governance might find *Towards Safe City Centres*?—or at least the first three chapters—of interest. The critical materialist framework elaborated by Helms provides much food for thought to theoretically inclined researchers. The book not only suggests that Marxist geography is brimming with life these days. It also offers a (meta-) theoretical framework for researchers who want to elaborate their own critical view on the world without committing themselves to positivism or to the recent relational geographies.

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